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<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.2.14>

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Book Reviews

Issue 8.2 (Fall 2019)

Review of *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labor After the Avant-Garde* by Stephen Shukaitis (Rowman & Littlefield International)

Andrew J Wood

ABSTRACT Stephen Shukaitis has produced an interesting text by situating a strategic conversation between artistic avant-gardes and autonomist political movements. He begins with a plea for rethinking strategy, and not just questions of tactics, in seeking radical aesthetic and socio-political change.

The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labor After the Avant-Garde. By Stephen Shukaitis. London, U.K.: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016, 176 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-78348-173-6.

Stephen Shukaitis has produced an interesting text by situating a strategic conversation between artistic avant-gardes and autonomist political movements. He begins with a plea for rethinking strategy, and not just questions of tactics, in seeking radical aesthetic and socio-political change. How may radical artists and radical political actors learn from each other in terms of strategy? For instance, what can the latter learn from the example of Dada, not as an aesthetic choice but as a conscious (and collective) set of strategic options for political change? It is through this strategic lens that he turns to examples ranging from the Situationists to contemporaneous musicians. Yet the framing is not to think politics aesthetically (nor aesthetics politically) in a generalizable way, but rather to see specific intersections between the strategic predispositions towards rupture in radical movements that engage both register (6–10).

Strategy, Shukaitis argues, must first and foremost anticipate, prepare for, and counteract the myriad ways in which the state-capital system works to find and exploit “new forms of subversion so that their energies may be rendered into new mechanisms for capital accumulation and governance.” (147) Shukaitis doesn’t completely flesh out arguments supporting this claim—it is simply taken as a given—as it likely is assumed by most readers. Importantly, however, he doesn’t bemoan this co-opting ability of capital, but instead argues for shifts in strategy that can successfully subvert capital’s all-encompassing ambitions through cultural and political productions that defy such co-optation through their unintelligibility. The most central of these strategies discussed here are over-identification and work refusal.

Over-identification is, for Shukaitis, a strategy of hiding in plain sight by so overtly identifying with key aesthetic aspects of their opposition. He presents Slovenian art/musical group Laibach (and the broader Neue Slowenische Kunst anti-state) as an

exemplar of over-identification. Laibach pushes proto-fascist aesthetic choices so far as to render them absurd. Beyond this, Laibach also holds up a critical mirror to a society they seem to be desperately warning about the dangers of the very displays they articulate. In other words, their music (and accompanying videos) utilize fascist imagery as a way to (through playful enjoyment) undermine fascism itself, but also to reveal the intersections between fascist tendencies and consumption of cultural commodities. Shukaitis's handling of Laibach as an example of over-identification is reminiscent of Slavoj Žižek's discussion of Rammstein's performances as an avenue toward libidinal enjoyment of fascist pleasures divorced from their dangerous ideology and political platform. Fascism is effectively undermined from within, or so Žižek and Shukaitis claim, and neutered through this very process of celebrating its aesthetic appeal while rejecting its violence and ethno-nationalism. Yet, a crucial question is largely ignored; what happens if the performative over-identification is actually mobilized by fascists themselves? The intentionality of the artist(s) or other subversives would hardly matter in the face of their work being utilized by the very reactionary ideologues they are over-identifying with in order to undermine. What, in other words, happens if the "over" aspect of over-identification isn't adequately legible, and the performance, work, or idea is simply taken as fascist identifying? In a text on radical potentiality, shouldn't we also look for reactionary potentialities as well? The problematic intentionality raised then points us towards what Laibach may have meant rather than what audiences may have made of them. Intentionality has very little place in Shukaitis's other key discussion, however, on the strategy of work refusal as sabotage.

Work refusal has long been discussed as a radical tactic, usually in terms of stoppages and strikes, but Shukaitis posits that it should also be rethought. This is especially prescient in our contemporary moment, defined by a "new spirit of capitalism" (a phrase he borrows from Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello) and the emergence of the so-called creative industries (and hence the declaration of the "creative class" as a new type of worker). So much of the global economy is driven by *creative* labor, and the ways in which rents and value can be extracted from said labor. The arts, he argues, have been variously complicit and critical of the movement towards this "new spirit," seen most strikingly in the simultaneous societal declarations that "everyone is an artist" and the insistence that everyone also be a worker. This is most especially the case, Shukaitis argues, in our contemporary moment of big data and social media, in which even our leisure activities are largely monitored and monetized.

The (im)possibility of rest for the artist (and one could perhaps also include the radical activist in this category) is a perplexing notion—and is likely to inspire further debate, perhaps most of all with theorists who follow Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze, or even Michel Foucault as thinkers celebrating the sovereignty, freedom, or resistance supposedly found in aesthetics. Central to so many of these claims is the separation of art from productive processes (that is, commodity-producing activity), claims that go back at least as far as Romanticism. Is this sovereignty threatened when leisure is—by and large—productive? Are we too attached to the work/leisure binary to imagine other realms of human activity? Are there not intersections between work and labor that make such a binary unsustainable? These are central questions that Shukaitis does not necessarily answer so much as pose for the erudite reader already deeply engaged in such theoretical lines of inquiry. More so, what Shukaitis argues is that such questions often elide important potential that strategies can have by accepting the frame of the debate in a capital-centric paradigm. Those working in either the avant-garde or the autonomist traditions are unlikely to discover much new about those singular areas of expertise, *per se*, but should find value in the conversation Shukaitis brings forth between them. Those with an interest in additional cultural outlets, such as punk or jazz (both are briefly

mentioned), hip hop, graffiti, or no wave cinema, may find applications for Shukaitis's work in their scenes and studies. But to judge this text based on use value seems to entirely miss Shukaitis's point.

 [Bio](#)

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ISSN 2469-4053